

HELANE AYLON

Painter ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ 131

~~Interviewed by Gloria Frym~~

~~Berkeley, California, November, 1977~~

GLORIA: At a time of life when most artists begin to forge their careers, what were you doing in your twenties?

HELANE: Of course, I was married. We had moved to Canada where I didn't know a soul. I had my first baby in a French hospital in Montreal- before I was twenty. A year and a half later I had another baby in Brooklyn in the same hospital I was born in. I was really busy with the children and I was totally involved with my husband's career.

What was your husband's career that you were so involved with?

~~You know the answer to that. And you know that it is hard for me~~
to make this public, but I'll do it anyway. He was an orthodox Rabbi. Well, that's over with.... I do not offer this information easily, but I know you will handle it carefully.

Of course. Can you tell me about your life?

It was his life but it became mine. I found a lot of beauty and meaning and associations. But as an individual I had to be very cautious--almost erased.

How?

I behaved according to what was expected of a Rabbi's wife. I never spoke before others because my husband was the family spokesman. ~~Unless of course I was called upon to read the invocation or some such thing.~~ "house" wife. I was supposed to be an inspiration to the whole community. Isn't that uplifting?

AYLON/2

I didn't have the liberty to ever step out of line. We went to about three weddings a week but I never danced- not even with my husband.

Where were you born and raised?

In Boro Park which is a Jewish ghetto in Brooklyn. I lived on ~~47th Street~~ ^{the same street} from the time I was born until I got married. It never occurred to me, when I grew up, that I could have my own apartment some day. This was unheard of in my "circles." Naturally I was not allowed to consider an out-of-town college. (My parents didn't even think a local college was particularly necessary for a girl.) And they thought all kinds of catastrophes could happen if I left home: I might eat non-Kosher food- who knows whom I would meet?! The only way to get out of the house was to get married.

What was your position in the family? Were you considered a creative child?

I was designated the "artistic one" from the time I was five years old. At eight, I made a drawing of my ~~Uncle Dave~~ ^{an uncle} with his mustache and glasses and it looked exactly like him, so my mother put it under glass on the coffee table. I drew my grandmother with her shaitel, ~~(she lived with us)~~; I drew my little sisters as they slept while I babysat, and copied the illustrations in Ethics of the Fathers. ^{the one art book in the house} Pretty soon the bridge table and buffet were covered with drawings under the glass tops. One day when I was eleven I pulled them all out from under the glass and tore them up.

Why?

I think I felt that doing art this way with my mother displaying it was like playing piano for company- it bothered me.

But wouldn't you say your parents approved of your making art by displaying it?

They approved as long as I didn't take it seriously. Art was considered an embellishment, a hobby, like some girls are born Hadassah leaders, some are cheerleaders, some valedictorians- Helene was artistic. You don't spend your time on art, you just are an artistic person. Art was never considered a worthy profession but it was kind of attractive as marriage bait. Think how nicely I could decorate the Succa!

Succa, the little shack?

Succa?

~~How to make a Succa is~~

right?

It's a little shack commemorating the temporary shacks that were built in the desert on the way to the Promised Land. We had one every year, for ^{eight} 8 days and I loved decorating it, as one might enjoy decorating a Christmas tree.

~~As a kid, were there clubs you could have joined?~~ ^{art} like the YMHA?

Once or twice I talked about going to an art club. But I got piano lessons instead, from Herman my third cousin! When I was thirteen, I wanted to try out for Music and Art High School. But the Hebrew principle of ~~Shulamith School for girls~~ ^{my school} ~~my elementary school~~ thought it was too far and I wouldn't have time to continue with the Hebrew. The seventh grade "English" teacher, ~~Mrs. Jacobson~~, told me two girls from ~~Shulamith~~ had tried last year and were rejected. This was not good for the school's reputation, so was I sure I had a chance? I ended up going to a Public High School three train stations away. After school I studied Hebrew, and Mishna every night at the ~~Midrasha~~ ^{Hebrew high school}, while I knitted argyle socks for a young Rabbi from Canada I had just met, and when I had expressed my doubts about religion to.

tone? discuss

AYLON/4

Were you doing any art in high school?

~~Well, then, when you were in high school, did you do any art?
So you had some doubts then about religion, but what about art?~~

in high school.

I took one art class. I copied Gauguin's glowing Women of Tahiti, trying oils for the first time. It wasn't an inspiring beginning because my art teacher came on to me. I was just 14. It was creepy going back to that class. I don't remember if I ever finished the painting.

~~When I graduated.
Did you get married while still in high school?~~

When I graduated.

Were you doing art while you were married?

I illustrated the Synagogue bulletin, if you call that art. I did ink drawings of the holidays. But I had my secret indulgence; I painted still lifes in oils. I tried to make the subject matter Sabbath candles because that seemed more okay to me. In the afternoons I worked in the front room so I could look out the window at the children playing outside. But around five o'clock I quickly put all the paints away. The house smelled from turpentine so I cooked something with garlic and opened the windows.

Would your husband get upset if he smelled paint?

He wouldn't be happy coming home to a house that smelled of paint. I don't think he wanted to contend with anything like that. I could ~~Anyway,~~ it was a small apartment and his study was the living room. There was no living room. ~~There was no room for me at all, for that matter.~~ But one fine day he thought I should have a college degree, so ~~when~~ the time my daughter started kindergarten, I became a student at Brooklyn College. I began taking art courses and then I had a place to paint.

That must have changed your life considerably.

I was a tourist in a wonderful world which I'd alight on briefly,

I was a student in a boarding school where I, a student on campus.

Just what was changed when the school started.

place to being.

at Brooklyn College. I began taking art classes and then I had a
do many things which I had never done before. I became a student
and one time had to present a project in a college class.
There was no dining room. There was no school. There was no
school. There was a small apartment and the school was the dining room.
I don't think he wanted to come with anything like this. I could
be working, he really couldn't come to a house that smaller of being.

When you heard her about it he wanted to be.

sometimes with being and others the things.
all the things was. The house was from the beginning so I cooked
something during the night. But during the night I didn't
I worked in the front room so I could look out the window at the
garage and see because that seemed more comfortable. In the afternoon
I wanted still in the night. I tried to make the perfect matter
the things of the night. But I had my secret things.
I translated the things into the night. It was all the things. I got

when you going and when you were working.

~~When I started.~~

~~When you had worked with me in the school.~~

entered the building.

slowly going back to that class. I don't remember if I ever
because my art teacher came on to me. I was that (14) it was
during the first time. It was, it was in the building during
I took one art class. I could understand the things of the night
in the school.

~~So you had some things that were different from what you had.~~

When you had some things that were different from what you had.

AVIOLA

AYLON/5

then retreat, feed the kids and tend the house. You won't believe this—but I had not been to the Metropolitan Museum until I went for my Art History course, at age 26.

What did you do in the studio courses?

I began painting brides with veils. I think that's when I started getting a feeling about transparencies. I studied with Reinhardt until I graduated in 1960. ^{Ad}

(There were a few more questions here about the illness and death of Helene Aylon's husband in 1960, which she would prefer excepted from this transcript-GF).

When did you begin to think of yourself as an artist?

I don't know. Maybe after I changed my name. My maiden name was Heléne Greenfield. Heléne was okay and still is by me. (I might just change it to Helene next month just to train people not to say "Heleen.") But Greenfield—my maiden name is another story. It connotes this little trio of Greenfield girls—me and my sisters. And to be "Mrs. Fisch" was not my idea of who I was as an artist. My new name came about after '63 when I painted murals in the children's ward of Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem. ~~My children were in camp then.~~ The hospital kids—both Arab and Jewish—would get wheeled into the hall to watch me work. They called me Doda Aylonna, which means Aunt Helene in Hebrew. A year later I did a mural in Bedford-Stuyvesant for a high school drop-out center. Some newspaperperson photographed me surrounded by the kids and when he wanted to do a story, he asked me my name. I knew that was the very time for my declaration of independence. I might have said Helene Smith— or anything, but somehow I found myself thinking "Helene, Helene, Doda Aylonna, Helene Aylon."

AYLON/6

How did you feel?

Excited, a bit scared. I started writing my new name over and over on pieces of paper, the way we used to. Remember how we wrote our names, our boyfriends' names, how does that sound, how does that look, how would it be if our names were combined in marriage? I guess I was thinking, how will it be now that I am this new person? But my family was horrified; I had been a widow, Mrs. Fisch, for four years, and what was this about suddenly. The next day when the story of the mural came out in the ~~World-Telegram~~ newspaper, two people called my mother asking if I'd remarried! To change your name in those days was sacriligious; now it's feminist.

And soon after you became an artist-

In 1964 I saw chapels being built at Kennedy Airport. I ~~drove~~ drive along the Belt Parkway and kept thinking, I wanted to do art in a chapel, and bridge the two existences and make sense out of my former life, to improve on it- ^{let there be} For once, a universal temple rather than a "shul." I made drawings and managed to show them to the architect ~~and board of directors~~ committee, director. They finally commissioned me to paint the library wall. I painted the word "ruach" which means 'spirit' and 'wind' and 'breath'. I painted the three letters of Ruach over and over again in transparent layers. The image looked like it was painted from the other side; it had an invisibility at first glance- a fogging-out and reclarification which probably led to the work years later, didn't it? My teacher ^{at} ~~in~~ Brooklyn College, Ad Reinhardt, came to see the mural, and there was an article on it in ART News.

You had done other commissions before, hadn't you?

Small projects, an old age home. No matter what you paint it could paint it could look like the hereafter! So I painted umbrellas and teacups- no one could read anything into that. Then, there was a commission in a hospital to paint the sweet, pastel babies' nursery. I had to wear a mask over my mouth, even when the babies weren't in the room. Next,

AYLON/7

^a
in Montclair Community hospital ~~in a~~ waiting room that didn't have windows, I was supposed to paint the outdoors, so there's a Corot kind of vista in New Jersey! To get this commission I had to make a sketch; the decorator wanted something that looked like a glorified golf course on a picture postcard. Once I started painting, I clouded it up. These are the things one goes through in painting for commissions. The last one I ever did was at NYU Medical Center, but I pretty much was able to do what I wanted; it was done in 1967.

It's been referred to as one of the first lyrical abstraction paintings.

Yes.

(over)
answer
In 1968

Were you doing your own work at that time?

~~And then you get your first studio, in 1968.~~

When did you get your first studio?

^{when}
My children were 16 and 17 ~~and now~~ for the very first time in my life, I had my own space. It was in the East Side on St. Mark's Place, four flights up. When I looked out the window, the street seemed like a huge carnival, and I saw a painting. It was wonderfully scary. I'd given myself permission to be an artist.

How did your working outside your home affect your children?

They were still going to Yeshiva, they had orthodox friends, and I'd go to a PTA meeting looking very different from the other parents. I was beginning to change. My children were too old for baby sitters, so they'd be left alone for long periods of time. I'd see them off to school each morning, travel to the studio, meander around to get my bearings, do some work, and suddenly it was time to leave. I'd ~~run home~~ ^{drive} home around rush hour- start dinner at 8 o'clock at night sometimes. There was no way to resolve it because I knew I couldn't work in the house and they would not move to Manhattan because their life and friends were in Brooklyn. It was a difficult time for all of us. I felt guilty being away from them in my studio but when I was not in the studio for a time I'd feel pulled away from the work.

AYLON/8

Even now as I tell you this, I feel guilty for telling you. But I suppose if my son is already a PhD in Plasma Physics and doing research at Princeton, and if my daughter is forging new ground in drama therapy, they must be grown up, and enough time has passed to be able to look back - even though my son still calls me Mommy. (Laughter)

So when you finally started working at the studio, what did you paint?

I made a painting that was really a fountain. I used three layers of plexiglas, each dabbed with spots of transparent glue which looked like drops of water. Then I staggered it with the help of a mechanic friend so that drops of real water would fall at different time sequences on the three layers. One couldn't know if and when a drop would fall. The fountain had its own mind. Sometimes it would get clogged up and nothing would happen. Another thing I did was scratch the coating on three layers of mylar and stretch these over fluorescent lights on the floor. It was like a lake you could look down into. ~~ad infinitum~~ After all this I started the silver paintings.

Which eventually got shown at Max Hutchinson.

Right.
They were transparencies of layered plexiglas over metal. Then I just painted on the metal alone and cracked the paint off with heat. The metal shined through the cracks. I guess elusive light and shifting imagery were always there. And the look of natural cracks.

Did you speak to other artists about ^{your work?} this?

In the beginning, nobody, I knew no one in the art world at that time.

Did you try to get a gallery to show your work?

When I had a body of work, I started to go to galleries. Of course, I didn't know which ones to go to, I probably started with Marlboro! (Laughter). Once I went to the Ruth White gallery and was told "We already have our quota of two women artists," and I said "Oh sure, of course," not even knowing how depressed I was.

AYLON/9

At that time there was no such word as "sexism" to clarify the issue. But there always is something good to balance the negative. I chanced on Bykert Gallery and met Klaus Kurtiss. He came to my studio in a blizzard and really looked. The work was too romantic for Bykert, but it was taken seriously by someone I respected.

How did you finally show at Max Hutchinson Gallery?

A neighbor artist, Clement Meadmore, saw my work and hung one of the pieces in his place. It was seen by his dealer, Max Hutchinson. The painting grew on Max every time he visited Clem. Not long after, Max called me to show at his gallery. The minute I got into that gallery, I really started working. I decided I was never going to take another commission, -I really started feeling like an artist because I was decreed an artist. My first solo show was in 1970.

What became of the early paintings, the brides?

almost all of
I'm afraid I destroyed them. In 1970 when I moved to Westbeth some got put into an incinerator; in 1969 when I moved out of my Brooklyn house, I left all the work by the garbage cans and watched at the window as a peddler went away with them in his horse and pushcart chanting "I cash clothes." I felt then that the paintings were too personal. Now they would be considered feminist, especially the brides. It's really hard to talk about this. ~~Let's change the subject.~~

~~Okay~~ How did it feel breaking into the gallery scene?

I had to break from one life to another. If you walk into a gallery looking like a housewife- feeling like a housewife, there's no way anyone will take you seriously. ~~And~~ it's never just the art, it's the legends that go along with the art, you almost have to have an added persona!

← When you have two children and you're a woman, the umbilical cord is still there.

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AYLON/10

Do you mean that an artist needs a separate persona to slip into like an actress slips into a part?

Just think of Larry Rivers, Andy Warhol, Rauschenberg...there's that personality cult, that aura, that goes along with their art. Samaris, Clifford Still.... Hopefully women will change all this.

Are you saying that the personality cult is detrimental to art and women artists?

(over) — It's a strain to have to live up to a legend. You know there's a real snottiness in most galleries. You feel you have to walk on tiptoe. And the galleries feed into the images, ~~the~~ ^{the} exaggerations, making the artist legend or zero.

Let's talk about California. ^{Why} ~~When~~ did you move ^{to California} here?

Why?

To test myself in a new place. To cross a desert. If I knew then that feminism would improve the scene in New York as much as it did I might not have moved.

How do you feel about allying yourself with those women whose roots in art come by way of feminism?

Very comfortable.

Even at the risk of being taken less seriously by the art community?

As far as I'm concerned, feminism at its best is what's going to change the world, and it's going to change art. ~~It's already changing values, anything could happen,~~ I'd rather choose life than worry about the art community.

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AYLON/11

What do you mean by "Feminism at its best?"

In terms of the art, I'm not referring to ~~simplistic~~, overt vulva art, and I think the period of explaining and wailing on shoulders is over.

~~Well,~~ What's replacing that?

Here's one simple thing: We're getting healthy and we're making everybody else healthier by bringing fresh air to a stuffy art world.

You still haven't defined feminist art. Can you?

No, not without being simplistic. There's the feminist issue, which is political, and there's the feminine, which I see as a spiritual dimension in both men and women.

~~I understand the political, but~~ what do you mean by the spiritual dimension?

I'd say there's this largeness, this emptiness- a void, which is also an openness to experience. It's not absolute, ~~or dogmatic~~, specific. It has to do with knowing without a fixed point of view. There's a wisdom, another kind of intelligence; There are other quests- more generative, more pervading. There are other spaces, and other ways of encompassing the world and ordering it.

This ^{all the arts.} is relevant to ~~literature and all the disciplines.~~

Yes. But sometimes I don't like the term "woman writer" or "woman artist." This implies that there's a particular kind of women's work- instantly recognizable- no matter where she is from- no matter what her situation. It doesn't take into account the endless variety of 50% of the human race. There's now a term called "classical feminism" which has a deeper connotation.

called "categorical testimony" which has a deeper connotation.
and the subject of 203 of the human race. There, a man's sex
no matter what his education. It goes, I take into account the
woman, a word - practically irrelevant - no matter where she is from -
"woman subject." This subject that there, a categorical kind of
idea. But sometimes I don't take the term "woman subject" as

~~This is relevant to the subject and not the subject.~~
on the way.

the words and ordering it.
more belonging. There are other aspects and other ways of encompassing
another kind of intelligence: there are other aspects - more general:
to do with knowing without a direct point of view. There, a woman's
obscure to excellence. It's not a subject, or a subject's subject. It has
I, I say there, a little intelligence: this subject - a word: which is also an

dimension;

~~I understand the difference, but don't see how men or the subject~~

dimension in both men and women.
to be subject, and there, a the testimony which I see as a subject
no, not without being subjective. There, a the testimony that's which

don't still mean, I believe testimony is. Can you?

clearly give yourself a different idea of a subject's word.
there, a one subject thing: we're getting really and we're making

~~It's just a reflecting thing~~

is clear.
it's and I think the belief of existing and setting on yourself
in terms of the it's I'm not referring to ~~the subject~~ itself and

that do you mean by "testimony of the subject"

WITNESS

AYLON/12

do you by "classical feminism?"
What ~~does that~~ mean exactly?

It's a cultural force, it's a consciousness without labels and expectations and a "look".

And you don't think that assertiveness is at odds with what you call the feminine?

I don't think receptivity is inertness because it comes from strength and a spiritual largeness.

Earlier you spoke of transferring your spiritual search from religion to art.

You know, I really dislike the word "religion" and the word "art" almost makes me nauseous. I don't like the word "spiritual" (though I just kept talking about it), but I do like the word "search."

Okay, how would you define your "search?"

(Laughter)

~~Before I do this, could I have some ice cream? (More laughter)~~

(Pause)

Okay³ my search: I've been looking for natural laws. First, in the early work and those elusive silver paintings and the large metal works, I explored how light glimmers through and how it's dependent on something external, like where the viewer stands. I'd subtly buckle (2) pieces of metal and compare how they differed because of the light hitting them. Then in the paintings that change in time, I was looking to see how things transform involuntarily. They stained through in their own way; the paper creased and air pockets formed without my hands. Even early on I blotted globs of paint and they formed branch-like images. It's the natural handwriting of the world—~~it's~~ branches and cracks.. Back to your question about the search:

AYLON/13

I'd like to think
You know the Hebrew word for "art" - "amanute" - ~~amenute~~ comes from
the root, "amen"- "so be it." My relying so much on materials and
time- maybe that's an act of faith.

Harold Rosenberg, the critic, talked about loosening the hold of
the artist on the work. Is that also what you're doing?

It's precisely what I'm doing- eliminating my scribble, my image,
my handwriting. For instance, what I'm starting to do now is pour
oil in a straight line and it forms a pool. That's its own natural
shape. If the oil dries on top, forming a layer of skin, that's its
natural texture. And if I lift the panel and the skin breaks because
of gravity, (and each time the skin does break differently)- it's the
natural forces that have caused these images. ↗

~~You certainly are loosening the hold more than you ever have-
or for that matter, more than any other artist I know of.~~

→ You've worked with images that are relatively fragile,
~~and yet they say that people become artists because they hope
for immortality.~~ *How do you feel about art and immortality?*

~~I'm testing time. Do things get better in time rather than decay?
So far, it seems so according to my work, which changes for the better!~~

~~That's pretty hopeful!~~

It's conceited for an artist to think that what he or she does is
immortal. Everything changes. For instance, DeKooning was my hero
at one time. I look at him now and I see the way the bodies of his
women are torn apart. I've heard that he starts a work with the mouth
of a woman, then slashes it over and over with strokes. Psychologists
might call this vagina dentata agitation! So I can't appreciate him
in the same way I did before feminism. ~~my consciousness got raised~~. All work
gets new implications put into it. Carol Duncan writes about the

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AYLON/14

French salon painting which often depicted old men, and this alluded to the reactionary status quo. Seen centuries later, we might think it alluded to saintly sages.

Then art isn't as precious as it's made up to be.

Exactly. Every great art both recognizes and annihilates the art that came before it. When Pollack dropped his paint across those big canvases, he cut out everything before him. He also started something: the gesture, extending art. When Ad Reinhardt did all black paintings, he said this is it, no more signatures, no more expressiveness. He just about obliterated art, and the artist, and himself. But he found a great purity in this leap. These two artists have been important to me because they have not been afraid of a void, of scribbling over themselves, of darkening out themselves.

In dealing with the void, there
~~You, too, don't fear the void. But~~ you must ^{be} have fears and doubts...

Sure, the moment when the thought comes that all these years have been for naught- little things like that! The moments of worrying whether the art will last, whether I will last. Worrying about getting injections from critics and collectors and the NEA, and faculties and galleries and everything and everybody. Better to rely on friends and on oneself. But, damn it, you can't, you need the whole thing.

Actually, the critics have been good to you, haven't they?

Yes, they've been very good, both male and female.

But you still had to promote yourself.

Promoting is very demoralizing, but it is necessary. Writers have to keep sending out manuscripts and getting them returned. Artists must find teaching jobs, which are scarce. The galleries are overcrowded and ruthless unless you sell well. You know all that...ho-hum. God, what dumb work sending out slides. I think

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AYLON/15

it's not the good reviews: It's either doing mainstream art or being in the good gallery. If you're in one of the magic six galleries, you can breathe without having to spurt your own name with each breath. (Laughter)

What's the proportion of time you spend between actually ~~doing~~ doing your work and hustling?

Sometimes it feels like my whole life, and sometimes I say fuck it. Sending out those letters and slides is like working as a secretary, even though the boss is me.

What so you need to be able to continue your art full-time?

Myself- that is, my self. A clear head. A large work space. No anxieties about money. Oh, utopia. A teaching job where I wouldn't have to hide my feminism to keep the job, because I love intense relationships with my students.

What happens when you don't work for awhile?

I feel like the ~~time~~ wasn't accounted for.

What do you think is the most difficult thing you have to overcome in order to make art?

Day-to-day isolation. Of course, that is also the best part of being an artist. When it's good and I'm working well and totally alone it's like the feeling you get when you hear the Magnificat by Bach. I'm so grateful. When it's bad, it's a dungeon. I wonder why I'm locking myself away from the world. To do what? For what? That's why I need to teach- to give, to love.

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AYLON/16

Isn't that the paradox of being an artist? Would you have it any other way if you could?

Well, the art dictates how to have it. I can't dictate. If I needed to photograph elephants, I might be travelling in Africa now.

You've been a serious artist for (10) years now.

A long time. It's like marriage vows, for better or worse. You just continue, no matter what comes of it. It's a lifelong commitment, a search that matters more than sacrifices, more than isolation.